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# PASSAGE

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PASSAGE

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts  
Visual Arts

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by  
Shannon Lee Wright  
December 2008

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Accepted by:  
Anderson Wrangle, Committee Chair  
Sydney Cross  
Andrea Feeser  
Susan Grier

## ABSTRACT

This exhibition addresses reconciliation. Through the journey of understanding we are able to either pass through our negative experiences or we can choose to accept that they are what they are. Through the placement of images the viewer is brought through this passage to a threshold for crossing from discomfort to reconciliation. At 40"x50" these photographs have become environments that viewers become immersed in. When I begin to make my images I have not yet fully realized the final photograph and there are several camera controls that I utilize to complete my images. When I place an object in my image I do so to speak to dislocation. The object found in an unpredictable location creates an air of anticipation or unexpected outcome. Photographing in the South affords me the opportunity to more easily embrace these feelings in my work. In this exhibition a menacing atmosphere can pervade the entire region as trees, vines and water passageways silently lurk in the Southern Gothic I am drawn to. In my quest for images that truly speak to this ideology of contradictions I have looked to other sources of enlightenment and understanding. In the Wabi-Sabi conventions of beauty and all things impermanent we find an aesthetic and ideal that aligns itself with the Southern Gothic tradition. In line with Sally Gall I am drawn to places that speak to mystery and yet also exude a picturesque quietude. Like Sally Mann, I work from the ideology that the Southern Gothic sensibility embraces the concept that love emerges from pain and loss and that this then becomes memory. We all have a past to reckon with and through these photographs the viewer has a window to that opportunity to reconcile his or her own pasts and presents.

For Barry...

Who brought me through the light.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to first acknowledge my thesis committee members: Anderson Wrangle, Sydney Cross, Andrea Feeser and Sue Grier. It was your resolute faith in me coupled with your continual insistence on excellence that brought this all to my own realization. Thank you for pushing me to always question “why?” Thank you to Sam Wang who saw in me the potential that would bring me to Clemson. To Hideki Kihata and Sara Brooks Clark: there are not words enough to thank you for first believing that I could follow my dreams and then for your never-ending dedication to helping me get where I needed to be to accomplish those dreams. Thank you also to all of my fellow graduate students who showed me the ropes and taught me to see in new ways. I would be remiss to not thank David who first saw in me the potential for greatness and stood by my side through much of this journey. Reminding me that great things are never achieved without much dedication and sacrifice he stepped aside to allow me to fight my own demons and find reconciliation in my own way. I would like to especially thank Jeffrey and Kaylee. I could never have done this without you and your willingness to give up so much for my dreams. And finally, to Barry who joined me on the most crucial segment of my own passage and taught me that journeys are meant to be shared.

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## PASSAGE

This exhibition addresses reconciliation. Through the journey of understanding we are able to either pass through our negative experiences or we can choose to accept that they are what they are. We then come to an acquiescence that allows us to live in the moment we are experiencing. This exhibition engages that journey. Throughout the history of photography, photographs have had the power to awe and inspire, frighten and alarm, motivate and provoke. Through this medium I am able to express these same senses in my own work. These images are made to provoke strong feelings in the viewer. Emotions as we feel them are meant to give essence and pungency to our lives as well as our memories.

Through the placement of images in this exhibition the viewer is brought through this passage to a threshold for crossing from discomfort to reconciliation. The images are placed in such a way as to lead one through the journey of negative experiences into acceptance of those memories. By beginning at “Demons” (fig. A:1) and walking from the beginning to the end of the exhibit, where they arrive at “Reconciliation” (Fig. A:2) they are guided through this journey. The images in this exhibit are also grouped together to allow the viewer to experience this on a smaller scale. For example, upon first entering the gallery space one is confronted by “Morning Senses” coupled with “Encounter”(figure A:3). These two images placed together speak to the oppressive religious boundaries placed on many individuals and then to the journey through

understanding and acceptance of the freedom of casting off those beliefs that can be so restrictive and limiting.

Because I work mainly with a large format camera I am forced to slow down and experience my surroundings. When I begin to make my images I have not yet fully realized the final photograph. I view my surroundings through my lens and then compose the image to evoke the emotion that best personifies these strong feelings. There are times, however, when a digital camera affords me the opportunity to utilize light to my advantage. At times the digital camera can capture a different quality of light that I am not been able to capture with film.

Camera height and angle are integral in decision making and very little is left to chance. Camera controls are utilized to evoke certain emotions by allowing more or less light to pass through the lens. To make some of the images more unsettling they are made from the vantage point of lying on the ground. From this angle of view the senses of the viewers can be heightened in bringing them to a spot at which they do not belong and cannot experience any other way. In each image the camera angle gives the viewer the first step in this experience and then takes them throughout the passage. After bringing them to this place of disquiet in the foreground of the image the viewer is lead through the space to their own understanding of the discomfort.

These images are printed on a large scale. At 40"x50" these photographs have become environments that viewers become immersed in. They then feel overwhelming



to the viewer as well as cause an unsettling disposition in them. By use of such large imagery I can more effectively create a representational illustration addressing the anxiety of moving out of a comfort zone into a space of unsettling disquiet and then crossing that threshold into acceptance. In “Threshold” (Fig. A:4) I have purposely left off the top of the bridge and focused on the passageway through this arch by cropping into just this portion of view. The image is of the view through the bridge and the viewer is placed in front of the passageway. This passage, or threshold, is metaphor for the internal journey through anguish into acceptance.

When I place an object in my image I do so to speak to dislocation. The object found in an unpredictable location creates an air of anticipation or unexpected outcome. The view is wider and shows a more encompassing landscape. The mill houses and watershed shacks are places that are inaccessible and closed off. However, there is the sense that one could enter through a broken window or rotting door. The buildings are representational of a claustrophobic and overwhelming emotional reality in contrast to the pictorial tranquility the natural landscape brings to mind.

“Resolution” (Fig. A:5) is an image of a place that I go to contemplate my own life’s passages and the reconciliation of my own memories. This image is made from a nearly direct angle and at an eye level vantage point. I pulled back and showed a portion of the area around this building. I did this to cause my viewer to enter into this environment not as an unwanted spectator but rather to begin to see the beauty that lies

within. In making this image in the bright sunlight I am able to highlight the subtle hues that bring a sense of peace and serenity that transcends the fear of what lies beyond in this broken down shack. This image becomes metaphor for the potential to see past the debris of memory and resolve those emotions that are unfavorable. It is here that I sit and listen quietly to the leaves moving in the breeze and the water rushing by. I have never been able to get to the water shack that rests on the banks of this small river, and I wonder what lies beyond in that small building. The viewer is brought to this sacred place I call my own however I have not shown all that lies within.

“Reconciliation” (Fig. A:2) speaks metaphorically to the experience of the passage through internal pain into understanding. Through my camera I’ve altered the amount of light at the end of the tunnel but have not permitted the viewer to see what is on the outside. By placing the camera on the ground the viewer has the feeling of walking through this tunnel on his or her own. The bench placed directly in front of these images allows one to pause and contemplate their presence in an imperfect place. The viewer is then directed through the light and has the opportunity to just be and rest there. Reconciliation is a process that is engaged in differently by each person. For some this may be knowing that a difficult passage has been traveled. For others it may be in passing through the end and walking into that metaphorical “light” of acceptance and understanding.

Directly across from this triptych is another triptych titled “Courage to Cross into Resolution” (Fig. A:6). These three images speak pictorially to the possibility of crossing those barriers that hold one back from reconciling their own past emotional scars. These images are objective in their presentation in that they speak to a quieter attitude in the classic landscape style. These two walls speak directly to each other however “Reconciliation” does this in a subjective manner in that each viewer is given the opportunity for a perceptive experience of their own. Because of this, the viewer is given the opportunity to experience this as the subject of the image rather than the image being the subject of the experience.

Photographing in the South affords me the opportunity to more easily embrace these feelings in my work. Living in the South can be an uneasy living...experiencing the mixture of sorrow, humility, honor and graciousness that lives alongside the insubordination that plays out against a backdrop of ornate physical beauty. Like my predecessors I watch as this subtle juxtaposition of light and dark, innocence and complexity leaves the battle between the obscurity and the splendor intriguingly undecided.

In this exhibition a menacing atmosphere can pervade the entire region (figure A:7). Trees, vines and water passageways silently lurk in the Southern Gothic I am drawn to. Even in the regions I traverse, the South’s passionate and tragic history is never far away and can lend itself to eerie and disquieting images. These images are a

vehicle for exploring the human heart in extreme situations and then arriving at one's own fundamental reality. These images take the viewer through pessimism and gloom into the possibility of appreciation and acceptance of that which has altered our perceptions.

In my quest for images that truly speak to this ideology of contradictions I have looked to other sources of enlightenment and understanding. In the Wabi-Sabi conventions of beauty and all things impermanent we find an aesthetic and ideal that aligns itself with the Southern Gothic tradition. In this Japanese ideology beauty is not seen as something of great grandeur; is not stunning or even enduring. It is found in nature, not in the moments of lush bloom, but rather in the inception or subsiding of such landscapes. It is about the “minor and the hidden, the tentative and the ephemeral: things so subtle and evanescent they are invisible to vulgar eyes” (Koren). This ideology goes on to suggest that beauty may even lie in an altered state of awareness that combines extraordinary moments of poetry and grace. So it is with the human condition. We can choose to find beauty in ourselves not only at moments of great enlightenment or grandeur, but also in moments of discomfort and unease.

Expressing art through the use of natural landscapes has a rich and varied history, even before photography was discovered. Some of the first artwork discovered spoke to the natural surroundings of man, such as the hieroglyphics and petroglyphs found on cave walls illustrating interactions between man and bison, the sun, moon, or even the stars.

Through the centuries, as man's ability to express himself seemingly became more sophisticated, artwork became more realistic. Due to the desire for the most realistic art photography emerged. In its infancy, and by the very nature of having to have extremely long exposures to subject matter, landscapes and still lifes were the obvious choices of photographic capture. The very first photographic image that we have record of was that of Josef Nicephore Niepce titled "View from his Window at Les Gras" and was not only the first photographic image but the first image utilizing landscape.

Over the years photography became a way to record visits to places that most people could only imagine. Photographers such as Francis Bedford, Herman Krone, and Samuel Bourne captured images of Europe and Africa and brought them back to England and France. In the late 1860's, photographers such as Eadweard Muybridge and Timothy O'Sullivan would venture across the America's in search of "an untamed landscape of extraordinary beauty. ... By choice of vantage point, [they] were able to evoke the vastness and silence of this remote area in intrinsically photographic terms" (Rosenblum). People were now able to produce mechanical images that spoke to the early romantic paintings addressing the ideology of a land that reflects human emotion. Many contemporary photographers also recognize that the forests, woodlands and natural caves can personify immensely powerful and emotive feelings.

Sally Gall is one who recognizes this and is able to create images that speak to what is mysterious and unexpected. Like Sally Gall I am drawn to places that speak to

mystery and yet also exude a picturesque quietude. Through the use of light and dark I speak to a world that remains evocative in nature. Speaking to Gall's work, Mark Strand suggests that her photographs "represent a brilliant accommodation between the obvious and the hidden, the known and the unknown. They are precise about what is mysterious without ever ceasing to be mysterious themselves and are lyrical without undermining or distorting their subject" (Gall). Gall also speaks to the possibility that while we may want to count on the stability of the place that we are occupying, it may be more realistic to see it as something that can be altered by our own perceptions.

Perhaps the artist that my work is most closely aligned with is Sally Mann. While I do not employ the same methods that she does in her image making, I have found myself in line with her thought processes. In her series "Deep South" Mann has photographed places that reflect the deep contradiction that is the South...those places that exude the historical scars and beauty as well as shame and romanticism. She welcomes the fact that the Southern Gothic sensibility embraces the concept that love emerges from pain and loss and that this then becomes memory. That memory then informs, feeds and enriches our art.

Life is not one big epiphany for me, but rather little moments of enlightenment that occur only when I am able to slow down and see what lies ahead of or beneath me. Like the reflections I see of myself in the water my own reconciling of the past is reflected in my art and can be seen through similar contemplation and study. Through

these images the viewer is brought to the threshold of the passage of acceptance. We all have a past to reckon with and through these photographs the viewer has a window to that opportunity to reconcile his or her own pasts and presents.

## APPENDIX

### Images

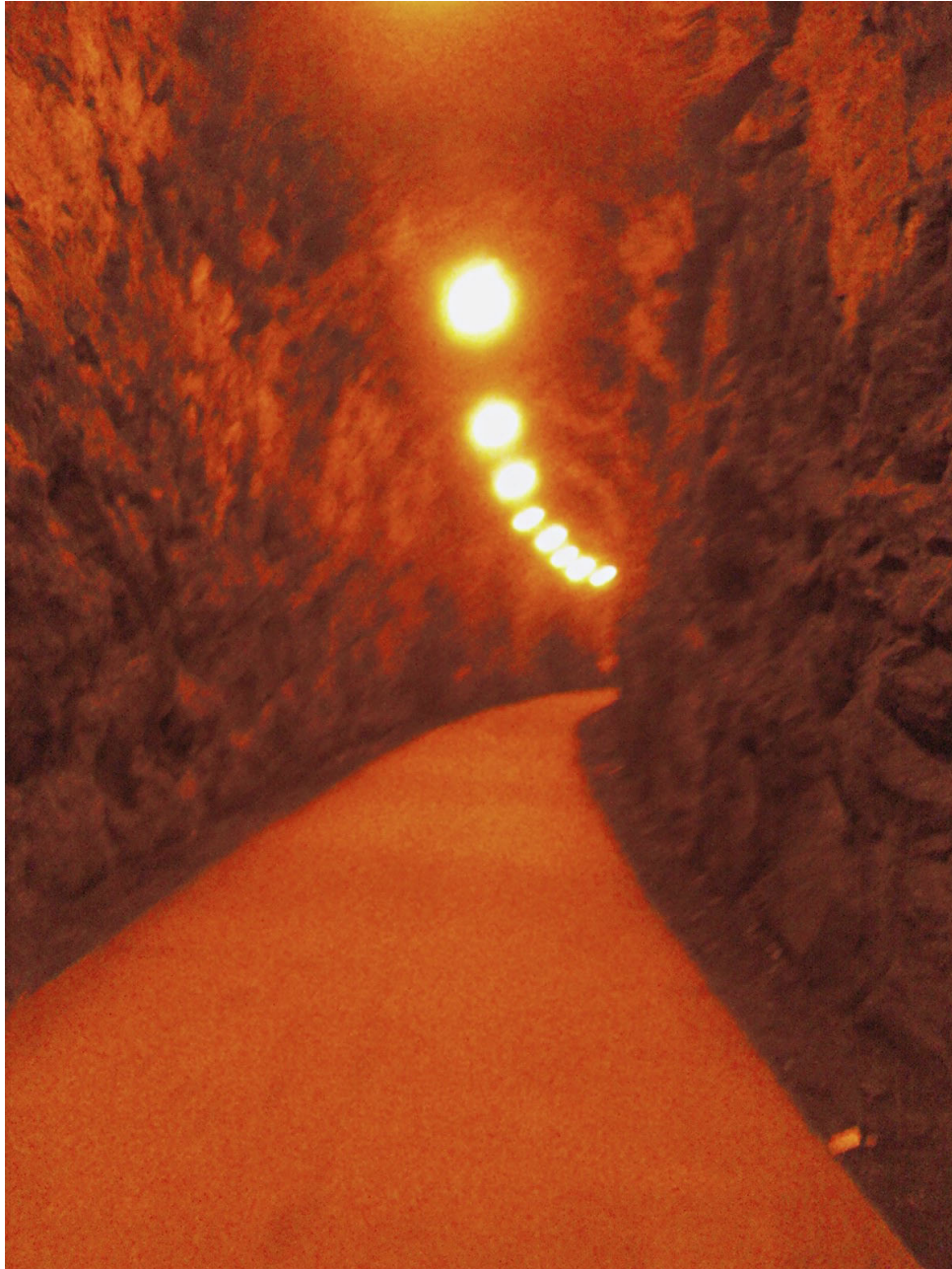


Figure A-1: “Demons”

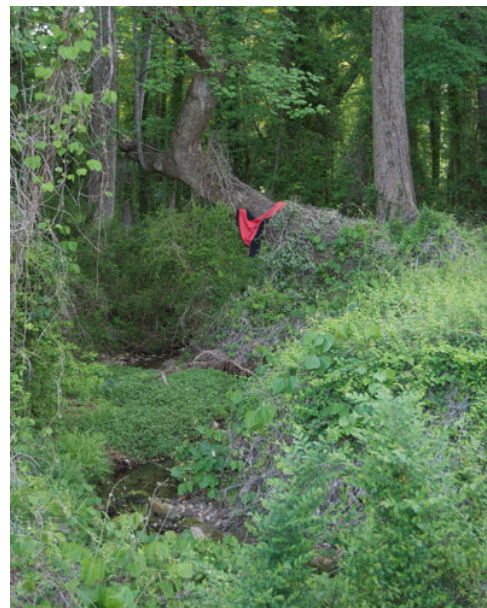




Figure A-2: “Reconciliation”



Figure A-3: “Morning Senses”



“Encounter”



Figure A-4: “Threshold”





Figure A-5: “Resolution”





Figure A:6- “Courage To”



“ Cross Into”



“Resolution”



Figure A-7: “Altered”

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